

New plan says denser housing can deal with SoCal population

ASSOCIATED PRESS

12:29 a.m. June 30, 2004

LOS ANGELES – Southern California can deal with an additional 6.3 million people by 2030 if it converts some land into dense urban housing while retaining most single-family neighborhoods, according to a new regional blueprint.

The "2 percent strategy" approved Tuesday by the Southern California Association of Governments envisions clustering housing and businesses near major streets, bus and subway routes to help deal with a population that will reach 23 million. The idea is to keep homes closer to jobs instead of creating a steady stream of suburbs that force long commutes and impact smog, traffic and housing prices.

One current example is a plan to build a complex of hotels, restaurants, shops and residential units around Staples Center in Los Angeles.

For decades, local governments have resisted creating high-rise, East Coast-style urban areas while residents traditionally have pursued the dream of a house and yard.

To deal with growth that is the equivalent of adding the entire population of Washington state, SCAG envisions denser construction on about 2 percent of the land in the six-county area.

"We don't have to change the entire region," SCAG Executive Director Mark Pisano said. "Basically we're saying we will continue to develop traditional neighborhoods."

The growth plan could reduce air pollution by 50 percent while adding 400,000 new housing units costing well below current market rates, according to computer models.

The agency spent \$2 million and hired a consultant team to cross city and county lines to create the comprehensive growth plan.

SCAG's board incorporated elements of the strategy into its regional transportation and air quality management plans for Los Angeles, Ventura, San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange and Imperial counties.

But the group has no authority to implement the plan. Individual counties and communities would have to act by changing general plans and approving housing projects.

Montclair Councilman Bill Ruh had concerns about the political will to do that.

"How do you change the minds of every council person that says, I want density, but not in my town?" Ruh said.

But SCAG Vice President Toni Young, who is mayor of Port Hueneme, said most cities understand the need for dense development around transit hubs.

"They know they have to have a lot of housing," Young said. "If they put it in areas where you don't put it traditionally and leave single-family houses alone, they're not going to oppose it."

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